MARY CASSATT

AMERICAN ARTISTS SERIES

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

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MARY CASSATT

BY

FORBES WATSON

AMERICAN ARTISTS SERIES

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

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FOREWORD

THIS *book is one of a series devoted to the work of various American artists and is published by the Whitney Museum of American Art, founded by Gertrude V. Whitney. The purpose of these books, like that of the Museum which sponsors them, is to promote a wider knowledge and appreciation of the best in American art.*

For assistance in preparing this volume for publication, we wish to acknowledge our indebtedness to the Durand-Ruel Galleries and The Arts Publishing Corporation for their help and coöperation in securing photographs of paintings illustrated; and to the museums and private collectors whose paintings, reproduced in this book, add so notably to the value of the illustrations.

JULIANA R. FORCE, *Director*

Whitney Museum of American Art

PORTRAIT OF MARY CASSATT

BY EDGAR DEGAS

From a Private Collection
Paris

MARY CASSATT

BY

FORBES WATSON

THERE are three pictures of Mary Cassatt as a person that I should like to present. The first is the young Mary Cassatt, a picture made up out of the words of her contemporaries, the story of her career as a youthful artist, and the suggestions that emanate from those works of Degas for which she is supposed to have been the informal model.

The second is of a lady past middle age and still able despite spasmodic illness to work with full mental vigor. Her talk was flavored with rich memories of all the great French artists of her day. Her cultivation was as dazzling as it was uneven, being the product of clear visual memories drawn from a series of wide, full and varied experiences, rather than the fruit of a coherent course of study. In the expression of her opinions she bore with no contradiction. This second Mary Cassatt was well versed in French and American politics. Biting characterizations of politicians were interspersed among her personal stories of Degas, her first meetings with him, her first long period in Italy, her trips with the Havemeyers to Spain, her vivid memories and opinions of a whole world of masterpieces in every medium—stone, glass, wood, tapestry, painting, pastel. She could call back out of the years a myriad of beautiful objects and recreate them for her listeners with a definiteness that revealed her mastery of language and the uncanny retentiveness of her visual memory. This Mary Cassatt I knew personally and was thrilled by as indeed were all the younger enthusiasts who had the good fortune to know her at that time.

The third Mary Cassatt, an embittered old woman, blind and lonely, unreasonable and vituperative, was still a burning force and a dominating personality, capable of a violent burst of profanity in one breath and, with the next, of launching into a plea to save the coming generation of

American art students from turning into café loafers in Paris and from all other forms of the uprooted ex-patriotism that had "destroyed so many of them."

"When I was young it was different," she appealed in a harrowing tone, touched with regret and apology; "our museums had no great paintings for the students to study. Now that has been corrected and something must be done to save our young American artists from wasting themselves over there." She waved her stick vaguely in the direction of the Left Bank.

This final Mary Cassatt I would not have missed knowing although she was a tragic figure. The fire, still burning within her, for all its strength, could not stop the oncoming blindness. (She had hopes of being saved by an operation.) Nor could it halt the increasing bitterness against her old friends, the French, nor the yearning for America impossible to satisfy because after all the years in France, she had lost her alliance with her native land. The disintegration of old age in her case had the unbearably tragic quality of the fighter who is beaten but cannot succumb, whose last sparks flare up against time itself.

1.

The suggestions of grace, slender vigor and smartness in the etching by Degas, *Au Louvre*, always had for me an especially romantic appeal. He is supposed to have used as a fleeting model for the figure with her back turned, none other than his admired and admiring Mary Cassatt. Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, when showing visitors through her collection, was in the habit of pointing out, in the millinery shop series, heads or figures for which Mary Cassatt had posed. But I always like to think of the Mary Cassatt of those far off days definitely as that slender woman in the Louvre, and to imagine, though her face is turned away from the spectator, with what discriminating penetration her keen eyes examined the pictures before her and with what undoubting conviction she formed her judgments; for Mary Cassatt had none of the sweet reasonableness of the unseeing.

Some coarse historian may prove eventually that Degas was not even thinking of Mary Cassatt when he made this plate. This will not destroy the visual image of her which it helped me to create for myself. I used to think of her as a young girl, not yet 20, buying out of a little shop window a pastel by Degas before she had ever heard his name and at a time when his fame in France had not yet started. She bought a number of his pictures before she met him, in some cases for less than a hundred francs, pictures that are now in the Havemeyer collection and in other collections of which, to use Mrs. Havemeyer's words: "Miss Cassatt was the godmother." Probably no other American painter has been the guide and arbiter of so many collections. As I have often said before, if Miss Cassatt had never painted she would nevertheless have won a permanent place in the history of art through the number of masterpieces that she was directly instrumental in bringing to American collections.

One of the talks with her, about her early years in Europe, that I remember with the greatest pleasure was her account of the visit that she made to Parma where, undistracted by the aims and ambitions of her fellow artists she devoted herself to the solitary working out of her own particular problems. Both Correggio and Parmigiano were studied by her at that time.

When she went back to Paris (it was in the early 70's) she was already prepared to join that group of independent painters, then ridiculed as "Impressionists" and now famous as distinctive individuals, incapable of being classified accurately under any of the so-called isms. A curious and revealing historical sidelight is indicated by the fact that this same slender young woman was one of the only American students at that period who neither feared nor sought Salon prestige. The official painters of the time dominated with pathetic completeness the schooling of visiting young American artists. Mary Cassatt alone embraced the independents of her day, Degas, Renoir, Cézanne, Monet and the others.

At the present time, when almost the first thing done by the bright

young boys and girls who retreat to Paris to study is to seek out the latest mode of the Ecole de Paris, we forget that in the 70's the majority of American art students went to Paris and stayed, sometimes as long as ten years, without giving the slightest hint that they knew or cared what their greatest French contemporaries were accomplishing. Placing themselves docilely under Gêrome, Bonnat, Carolus and the like they seem to have inhabited a world into which no liberal or revolutionary thoughts penetrated. Mary Cassatt knew this other world intimately and became at a young age an active member of it.

Untouched, or at least uninterrupted by the social life to which her money and her personal distinction could so easily have opened the doors, she bent her steel-like energies without deviation to the mastering of the hardest tasks that artists of high ideals set for themselves. Endowed with a passionately self-critical nature, Mary Cassatt was never a "lady" painter, always a "woman" painter. She studied the drawings of the sternest draftsmen, a paradoxical fact it might seem, considering her frank admiration for Correggio. But it is Holbein rather than Correggio who is reflected in some of her early heads even as he is in those of Degas. The newly awakened interest in the art of Japan began in Paris in the early 70's and the art of the Japanese woodblock printers now so familiar to Occidentals, seemed to the artists of that day almost magical in its originality.

Mary Cassatt admired the discriminating firmness of Holbein, the insistent purity of Ingres, the gracious subtleties of Correggio; she copied Parmigiano; her own color prints benefitted by her response to the compositional novelties of the Japanese. Her style developed cultivation through all her studies without losing its contemporary strength.

Some years later this young lady, leading a life that to a more jovial, less self-critical artist might have seemed too solitary and ascetic, despite her solid financial protections, gave at least one proof that, had she turned to business as a career rather than to art, her success might have paralleled

the success of her brother, a commanding personage in the development of the Pennsylvania Railroad system of which he became president. It was in this period that the French habit of speculating in contemporary art began its modern complexities. The system was then far more simple and far more honest than it afterwards became, but neither the French nor the Americans took kindly to the art of that day and one of the greatest of the French houses which invested too recklessly in it would have gone into bankruptcy had Mary Cassatt not come to its rescue both directly with cash and indirectly through her energy and capacity in developing the American market. Such was the young Mary Cassatt, productive, energetic, cultivated and distinguished, an active cooperator in the most vital movement of her time and a woman who dared to advise her many friends to invest largely, on the sole guarantee of her own remarkable foresight.

2.

When I first actually knew Mary Cassatt and visited her at her chateau at Beaufresne, Mesnil-Théribus, a pleasant automobile drive from Beauvais, she had long since won an international reputation. Her pictures were in American and European museums; her name was indelibly inscribed in the history of her period.

I did not expect her to resemble the image that I had formed of her in my youth yet there was in her, despite her lack of youth, an eagerness that made the years drop from her. She began to talk the instant that I alighted from the motor which she had sent to the station and the talk went on all that day. She reminisced as someone who has achieved, not boastfully but confidently, and not, of course, with an eye to the future. Sometimes she gossiped, as about the sad habit that Degas in his old age had formed of following funerals. She criticised Monet for his lack of mentality. Renoir she called an "animal," not meaning by this term that he disobeyed the social edicts of old Philadelphia, but that his interest in painting as an art was too purely animal. Cézanne whose work she had purchased years

before the great speculative boom in his work and resold in order to buy Courbet, was obviously one member of the group whom she knew only slightly. Of American art she enjoyed an ignorance born of almost half a century's absence from her native land. She admired greatly the pastels of La Tour and recommended his work to students as the best master of pastel portraiture.

What impressed me unforgettably about her, more than all the personal contacts with the leaders of her period, recalled from a lifetime of familiarity with painting and painters, was the range of her interest. If, unlike Renoir, her interest in the rising generation of artists was theoretical and general; if, through the loneliness that probably every expatriate realizes on the threshold of age, she already began to seem a little removed from the then growing movement, her responses to art were so many and so varied that one was inclined to refuse to accept the suspected limitations.

"We must drive to Beauvais and see the windows that I love, the finest glass in all of northern France," she would suggest after lunch, not: "I want to show you some of my things."

The real point of meeting her, even then, was that one couldn't listen to her, pouring out her ardor and her understanding, without feeling his conviction in the importance of art to civilization intensified. She increased the desire for more and still more knowledge. She made you share her intense hatred of aesthetic prevarication and compromise.

More than one artist made the pilgrimage to Mesnil-Théribus. Each one benefitted. Some may have winced when they realized her contempt for loafers, her power of creative concentration that heeded neither sickness nor pain. It is this Mary Cassatt that I remember best—seated on the terrace when the sun was warm, from which could be seen close at hand the brook where the trout for luncheon were caught. In her many years in France she had not missed the beauties of any of the French arts and certainly not of the French art of cooking.

That was the second Mary Cassatt, a vitalizing hostess, entertaining in

her chateau while the red-cheeked, beaming *bonne*, Mathilde, watched over the comfort of the guests with the warmth of the understanding, good-living peasant.

3.

The last day that I spent with Mary Cassatt was, as I have suggested, exciting but sad. The red tape of war had caught up and removed Mathilde from France back to the enemy's territory in which she happened to be born. Nothing more grotesquely bureaucratic and idiotic could have happened to so honest and kindly a human being. If, even a decade earlier, in her country home, and still happy, a hint of loneliness seemed apparent, it requires little imagination to realize what had happened to Miss Cassatt through the upheaval of the war, the separation from Mathilde, the temporary break in her life-long friendship with Mrs. Havemeyer and, finally, the blindness that she would not acknowledge.

Officially the war was over when I made my last visit to her in her apartment in the Rue Marignan. Indeed it had been over for more than a year and a half, but she was still violent, not, strange to say, about Germany but about Wilson, Clemenceau, about everyone except the Socialists. I arrived at 11 o'clock in the morning. She launched instantly into a semi-violent series of questions about artists or rather about the condition of art in America. But the subject of politics constantly intervened. At one point she exclaimed, tapping her cane on the floor: "If I weren't a weak old woman I would throw away my limousine, give up this apartment and live without luxury."

At five o'clock, after she had talked furiously all day and after she had refused to eat luncheon (she said she had given up eating luncheon) we went into the dining room to have tea. Sitting side by side at the big table the maid served us and placed between us a large compote of strawberry jam, and Miss Cassatt said: "If there is any jam on the table, help yourself." I looked at her startled and then knew for the first time that she was blind.

She had the air not of the sister of the president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, not of an old lady born to wealth, but, except for the hands, of a lean, bent, over-worked Puritan housekeeper gone blind in her old age after incessant domestic drudgery. That was my final vision of an artist who devoted at least fifty years, possibly more, to painting, drawing, etching, and whose memorable subject was so often the mother and child.

It was a sad final picture and still sadder ones were reserved for those who knew her in her last year.

Casually we think of Mary Cassatt as primarily a painter of the mother and child subject but the Memorial Exhibition of her work held at the Pennsylvania Museum of Art brought out many paintings from the homes of related and unrelated citizens of Philadelphia to prove, if proof were needed, that Mary Cassatt did not by any means limit her inventiveness or her observations to variations of the mother and child theme which nevertheless is linked unforgettably with her name as an artist. Everyone who knew her remembers her inherent ferocity, her capacity for uncompromising love of art, her hatred for shirkers and dodgers, her complete lack of any of the distractions, brought about by the need to make money, and her apparently complete freedom from any of the so-called entanglements of love. Her unabated interest in the mother and child subject may have one of those significances upon which the modern psychologist enjoys speculating. I leave that speculation to him. She had certainly, so far as I knew her, convinced herself at an early age that with all the flourishing prejudices against woman as a creative artist nothing could be accomplished in the difficult art of painting without a devotion capable of primary sacrifices.

Though she dealt so often with the theme that challenged comparison with many of the greatest painters, she never treated it in a hackneyed or sentimental way and in those tempting, provocative contrasts between the mature and the immature human form, she displayed a mastery of subtle draftsmanship equalled by few of her contemporaries. Before he

knew her when he first saw her work Degas said: "*Je n'admets pas q'une femme puisse dessiner comme ça.*"

She held to her own idea of the truth in painting and never flinched from the finer, closer difficulties of drawing. Her paintings alone do not tell the complete story of her art; one must see also her color etchings to realize the scope of her inventiveness. In some of her canvases her color is fuller and richer in its range than the gamut of what eventually became the accepted impressionist palette but, curiously enough, although women painters so often have a color sense, it was through her drawing, over which in her long career as an artist she exercised so much will power, that Mary Cassatt lifted her art to a high level that will not be fully appreciated until all of our prejudices against the woman artist have finally vanished.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Mary Cassatt was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1845. Her father, Robert S. Cassatt, a prominent banker, was a descendant of a Frenchman named Cossart who had emigrated from France in the seventeenth century, first to Holland and finally to America. Robert S. Cassatt had an admiration for French culture which he passed on to his children. Mary Cassatt's mother, who also came of a family long settled in this country but of Scottish origin, was a woman of broad interests, who had been educated in France, where she had learned to speak and write the French language like a native. When about five years of age Mary Cassatt's parents brought her to Paris where they remained until she was ten years old. On returning to America they settled in Philadelphia where Mary Cassatt continued her education and later studied drawing at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. About 1868 she decided to become a painter which in those days meant the necessity of study in Europe. It was not without difficulty that some time later she was permitted to go, her father telling her "I would almost rather see you dead."

It was in the galleries, not the academies, of Europe, that Mary Cassatt set out to study. At Parma she became so captivated by the work of Correggio that she remained eight months. It was at Parma also that she painted a carnival scene with two young girls throwing bon-bons which was her first picture exhibited at the Paris Salon, that of 1872. At Madrid the paintings of Rubens aroused her interest to such an extent that she hastened to Antwerp, where she spent the summer studying his work. It was here that she became acquainted with the copyist Tourny through whom she later met Degas. To the Salon of 1873 she sent a picture which was accepted, representing a young girl offering a glass of water to a Torrero. From Antwerp, Mary Cassatt went to Rome where, with memories of Rubens still fresh, she painted a head of a young girl which created much favorable notice when shown at the Salon of 1874. Degas,

who did not then know Miss Cassatt, is reported to have said of this painting—"That is genuine; there is someone who sees as I do." It was in this same year that she settled in Paris and painted a portrait of her sister which was refused by the jury of the Salon of 1875. After repainting the picture in more sombre colors, she sent it to the Salon of 1876, where it was this time accepted. Shortly after settling in Paris she had been recommended to the atelier of the fashionable Chaplin, but in spite of warm praise from him she did not remain.

Meantime she had come to know the work of Degas—as she wrote Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, "I used to go and flatten my nose against the (picture dealer's) window and absorb all I could of his art. It changed my life; I saw art then as I wanted to see it!" Her contribution to the Salon of 1877 was refused but she was more than consoled by a visit from Degas, whom Tourny brought to call and who invited Miss Cassatt to exhibit with the group known as the Impressionists. In talking with her biographer, Achille Segard, Miss Cassatt said, in referring to this invitation, "I accepted with joy. Now I could work with absolute independence without considering the opinion of a jury. I had already recognized who were my true masters. I admired Manet, Courbet and Degas. I took leave of conventional art—I began to live." Mary Cassatt first exhibited with the Impressionists in 1879 at their fourth exhibition, showing "Une jeune Femme dans une Loge," a portrait of M. Dreyfus, and several pastels. Through exhibiting with them, Mary Cassatt came to know all of the impressionist group, from Degas to Manet, Renoir, Cézanne, Monet, Morisot and Pissarro, her neighbor in the country. Degas remained her friend as long as he lived although, due to his bitter tongue, there were several estrangements. Although they counseled one another about their works and Mary Cassatt continued her admiration for his work, she never was actually his pupil.

From this time she exhibited with the Impressionists at their exhibitions in 1880, 1881 and 1886. An exhibition of her work in 1893 at the

Durand-Ruel Galleries, Paris, brought her reputation to a high point in America as well as in France. About this time she added the mediums of drypoint, aquatint and color etching to pastel and oil.

During her long and busy life Miss Cassatt not only executed many paintings which now enrich American collections, but she was instrumental in advising a number of Americans in bringing to this country masterpieces scarcely appreciated at that time. With Mr. and Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer and Mrs. Havemeyer's sister, she made several expeditions to Spain, Italy and Flanders searching for pictures, acquiring in this way many of the finest of the Havemeyer pictures now in the Metropolitan Museum. In spite of these journeys in quest of pictures, a trip to Egypt and a few visits to America, Mary Cassatt, after 1874 did practically all of her work in France. She maintained an apartment in the Rue de Marignan, Paris, had a villa at Grasse on the Riviera (where she saw much of Renoir) and a chateau in the Oise. Although spending the greater part of her life in France, her personality and interests remained characteristically American. She continued to paint industriously, leading much the kind of life she might have led had she remained in America. From time to time her work was to be seen at the Galleries of Durand-Ruel in Paris and in New York. In 1904 she was made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor. During this same year she refused to accept the N. W. Harris prize of $500.00 awarded her by the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1910 the National Academy of Design elected her an associate member. In 1914 she received the Gold Medal of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the only honor of this kind she ever accepted.

In France the Luxembourg Museum and many private collections possess examples of her work, while in America she is represented in all the principal museums and collections.

On June 19th, 1926 she died at 81 years of age, at her Chateau Beaufresne at Mesnil-Théribus, Oise. During the latter part of her life, she was afflicted with partial blindness, which, after 1912, increased, until,

towards the end it became almost complete. The death of relatives and friends made her feel more acutely the loneliness of a foreigner but in spite of her troubles she retained until the last, her keen interest in art and life.

EDMUND ARCHER

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ILLUSTRATIONS

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST (*Gouache*) 1878

H. 23 inches W. 16 inches

Collection of Mr. Richman Proskauer
Larchmont, New York

LADY WITH FAN, 1880

H. 33½ inches W. 26 inches

Collection of Mr. Chester Dale
New York

PORTRAIT OF A LADY

H. 28¾ inches W. 23½ inches

Collection of Mr. Chester Dale
New York

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AT THE OPERA, 1880

H. 32 inches W. 25½ inches

Collection of Museum of Fine Arts
Boston

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YOUNG MOTHER SEWING

H. 36⅜ inches W. 29 inches

Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art
New York

THE ARTIST'S MOTHER, MRS. ROBERT S. CASSATT

Collection of Mrs. W. Plunket Stewart
Haverford, Pa.

MOTHER NURSING HER CHILD, 1899 *(Pastel)*

H. 28¾ inches W. 21 inches

Collection of Durand-Ruel
Paris

Woman and Child Driving, 1881

H. 35 inches W. 52¾ inches

Wilstach Collection, Pennsylvania Museum of Art

In the Box, 1883

H. 17 inches W. 24 inches

Collection of Mrs. Edgar Scott, Jr.
Villa Nova, Pa.

THE BOATING PARTY, 1893

H. 35½ inches W. 46 inches

Collection of Mr. Chester Dale
New York

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THE TOILET, 1894

H. 30 inches W. 20 inches

Collection of The Art Institute of Chicago

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MATERNAL CARESS, 1896

H. 15 inches W. 21½ inches

Collection of Durand-Ruel
New York

Mary Cassatt

THE BATH, 1910

H. 38¼ inches W. 59 inches

Collection of Petit Palais
Paris

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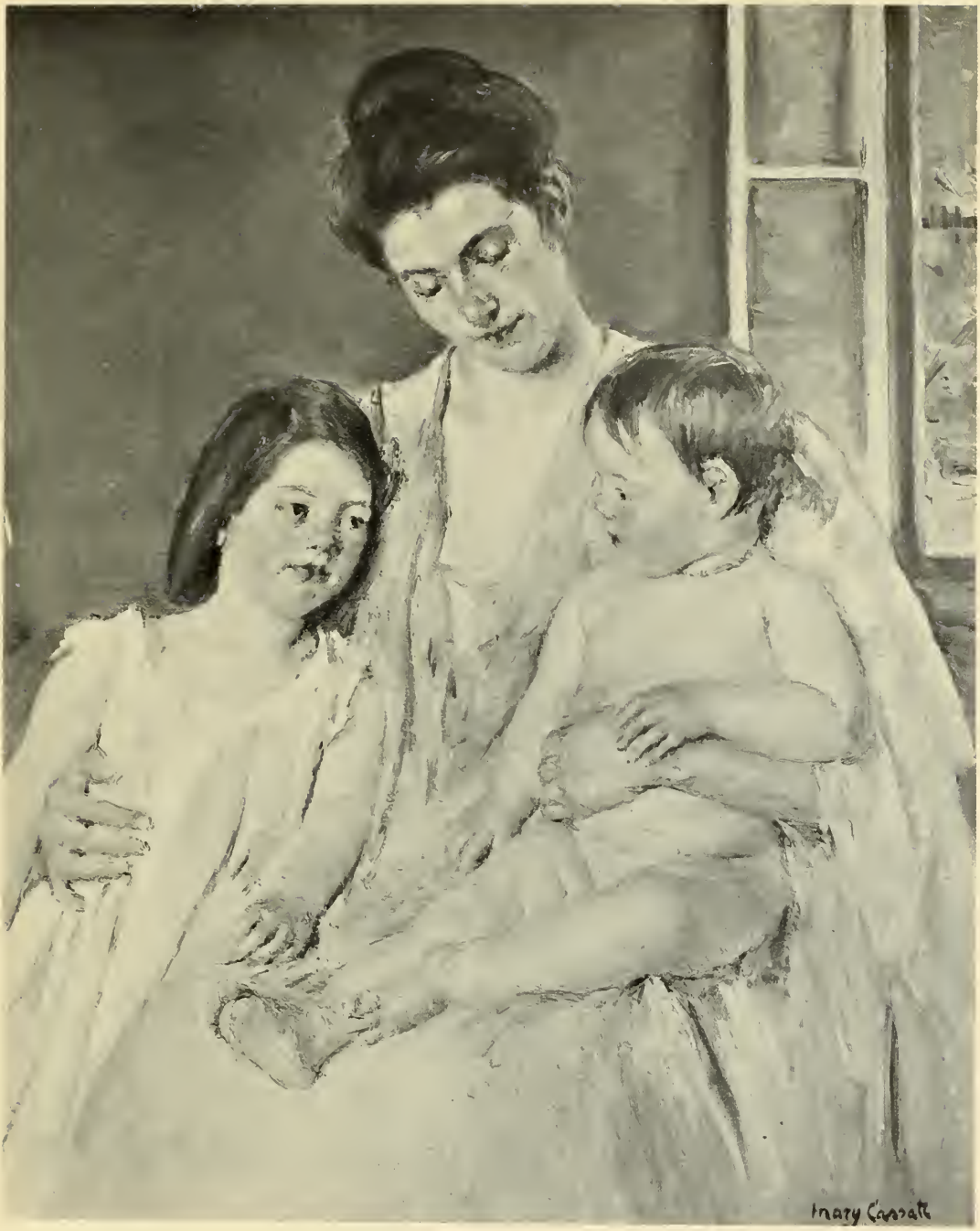
A Young Mother and Her Two Children, 1908

H. 36¼ inches W. 28¾ inches

Collection of Durand-Ruel
New York


Mary Cassatt

PORTRAIT OF MARIE LOUISE D.R., 1911 (*Pastel*)

H. 30½ inches W. 25¼ inches

Collection of M. Jean d'Alayer
Paris

THE VISIT (*Drypoint and aquatint in color*)

H. 10 inches W. 8 inches

THE LETTER (*Drypoint and aquatint in color*)

H. 10 inches W. 8 inches

NUDE CHILD (*Drypoint and aquatint in color*)

H. 10 inches W. 8 inches

Young Woman Trying on a Dress

(Drypoint and aquatint in color)

H. 10 inches W. 8 inches

Woman Holding a Fan, in Loge (*Aquatint*)

H. 7¾ inches W. 7 inches

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